

# Meet William John Burchell, scientist, explorer, hunter

BY FIONA CAPSTICK

When the Dutch East India Company established a supply station during 1652 in Table Bay, the Big Five abounded in the vicinity of present-day Cape Town. This was the southernmost limit of the black rhino's range, which stretched from Mali in West Africa, across to Somalia in the east, from Ethiopia in the north down south to our Cape Storms, the Cabo das Tormentas of the Portuguese navigators.

How ironic that the hunting ban slapped the Kenyan safari industry in May 1977 hastened the demise of *Diceros bicornis* and multiplied the threat to many other species as the professional hunters and their foreign clients were forced out and a well-financed game department and hunting infrastructure crumbled. This meant

exchanging independent foreign exchange for international interference and leaving the bush unpoliced and open to rampant poaching. The rest is history.

South Africa's sustainable use policies, dominated by the insight of men like Dr. George Hughes and Gary Davies and all of the Natal Parks Board, are playing the definitive role in the survival of the black rhino, the white rhino having been plucked from the brink of extinction and propelled into such revitalisation that the only place in the world where a rhino can be hunted legally today is in the Republic of South Africa.

Who, then, discovered *Ceratotherium simum simum* in the days of its initial abundance?

Long before Harris's books were written, the southern African interior was penetrated in the first two decades of the 18th century by "trekboere", Dutch-speaking nomadic cattlemen, as well as by a variety of naturalist travellers, missionaries and hunter/traders. From 1760 onwards, fearless Boer hunters ventured into the unknown north of the Cape Colony. History has it that a Boer, Jacobus Coetzee, an elephant hunter, was the first white man to see the spectacle of the Orange River.

He, and fellow Boer hunters such as Hendrik Hop, Willem van Reenen and Pieter Truter ran considerable risks with their cumbersome flintlock muzzle-loaders, hunting dangerous game and facing hostile tribes as far north as southern Namibia. We know very little of the exploits of these Boers and what we know has been gleaned from other sources as they left scant or no individually written records.

The arrival in Cape Town on 13 November 1810 of William John Burchell, a diminutive Englishman who was a brilliant botanist, linguist, scientist, explorer, hunter, artist and all-round naturalist, signalled a new development. During his epic four-year journey from 1811-1815 into the interior as far north as today's southern Botswana, down to the

southeastern coast and the mouth of the Fish River, returning to Cape Town, Burchell astounded his critics. He learned Dutch, discovered new botanical and zoological species, befriended Bushmen and documented their unique abilities, sending more than 60 000 annotated botanical, mineral, ornithological and zoological specimens to Britain. He discovered for Western science the white rhino, tsessebe, blue wildebeest and three varieties of zebra, which biologists later consolidated into two types, including the extinct quagga. This uniquely gifted man also recorded huge numbers of giraffe during his travels, the existence of which the British Museum refused to acknowledge until Burchell sent it an entire skeleton.

The modern reader will be intrigued by Burchell's plea for a "regulated trade for ivory" to control speculation and to ensure "fair dealing with the natives". A tusk could then be bartered for one fat-tailed sheep or some beads. This was when the early hunter/explorer could witness vast herds of migrating springbok and when today's Johannesburg was home to huge herds of elephant. Burchell's foresight is all the more astounding in the light of the seemingly inexhaustible paradise of game at the time. His map is filled with places attesting to this: Quakka's Fontein, Leeuwe Fontein, Buffelbou, Rhinosterbergen, Wolve-Kop and many more.

Although Burchell was primarily a botanist, his discoveries and meticulous records form part of our African hunting heritage. His two-volume *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, published between 1822-1824 with coloured engravings and drawings, brought to life the animals and landscapes of Africa and were directly responsible for encouraging William Cornwallis Harris and others to hunt in Africa.

This set in motion a literary chain of inspiration which would produce generations of hunter/authors who have left us an indelible account of our African big game heritage.

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